

THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE: A MODERN APPROACH TO BLACK CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Abstract: The Harlem Renaissance was the most influential black literary and cultural movement during the years after World War I. Previously, the African Americans went through racism, discrimination and suppression, so the Harlem Renaissance brought enlightenment and upliftment to the African American culture and became an inspiration for today's society. In 21st century, it enabled African-American "black folk" to catapult to a more advanced level in arts, music as well as literature defying the dominant culture's stereotypical perspectives. This paper broadly focuses on the history of the blacks and the significance of the Harlem renaissance as a historical movement which encouraged cultural identity of the blacks.

Keywords: (Historical background, Black art Movement, Harlem Renaissance, Cultural identity, Black authors.)

Introduction: Harlem Renaissance was a social movement to promote and attain Black identity, Black Consciousness, Black Pride and Black Culture. By the end of World War I, African Americans recognized their need for racial identity, consciousness, and pride in order to define their own standards of beauty. The universal tautness that encouraged the Harlem local social movement was the result of American cultural vitality and the execution of the intellectual endeavours of the black ethnic group in the United States. African Americans only demanded simple freedom, liberation and equal treatment but they only received humiliation, lynching and mob violence. The nonviolent marches and boycotts during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s beckoned the initiation of African American protests against racial injustices. The Harlem Renaissance literary movement was inspired by the American racial policy. It was an ethnic-centered, antiracist organization that fortified and sustained the social rights of the minority groups in general and the social uniformity of blacks with whites in America in particular. As a consequence to slavery, the racial policy that resided in segregating black ethnic group from so many social and political fields became an American cultural paradigm from the Constitutional act of Reconstruction after the Civil-War. Since several decades, Blacks have not simply been treated unfairly but they have been subjected to slavery, second-class citizenship, massive legalized discrimination, economic persecution, educational deprivation and cultural stigmatization. They have been humiliated, killed, beaten, raped, bought, sold, excluded, exploited, shamed, and scorned. Barbara Smith in her essay, 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism' (1977) stated that — "Any discussion of Afro-American writers can rightfully begin with the fact that for most of the time we have been in this country we have been categorically denied not only literacy, but the most minimal

possibility of a decent human life" (Smith, 1999:163) If there was lack of progress in Black life in American society, it was because there weren't any facilities for Black people such as education, freedom, income, and power to facilitate them to move up higher than slavery. They didn't have opportunity to show their ability and talent and they were always oppressed by White standards. Yet they have become increasingly successful against all these odds. The Harlem Renaissance became a cultural movement in the 1920s in which there was an incomparable paroxysm of literature, music and other artistic forms which was produced and inspired by African Americans. The Harlem Renaissance became a part of a worldwide urban revolution sparked by World War I (1914-18) centered on the New York City, the so called Harlem district. The cultural outburst, which followed the dramatic incursion of Southern blacks into Northern cities during and after the war was called Great Migration which brought the debate over racial identity and the future of black America to the forefront of the national consciousness. For nearly an era before the Harlem Renaissance, the image of African Americans in popular culture had mainly been designed by the minstrel show which is a wildly popular form of theatre that depicted blacks in a stereotypically comical manner. Even when African Americans were portrayed empathetically, they were nonetheless made to seem weak, feeble and submissive. On the other part, for black writers themselves, the superseding and empowering themes of risk and self-determination was portrayed vividly through the movement of black characters from the oppression of the South to the freedom and opportunity of the North. The black movement was the solution to racial disparity which prevailed since decades. This movement would take into consideration black expressive culture, not through slave insurgences, boycotts, or the secretive networks, but through intellectual inducements and artistic

competitiveness with an ideal set for social equality. Hence, the creation of the New Negro as opposed to the pre-war Old Negro, the freedom of the artist that Harlem writers took from the American life did not permit the complete formation of a nationalist literature. Although the intellectual leaders disregarded an ethnocentric type of arts by Harlem writers. It was discovered that not all black cultural features were taken into account. Cultural components like folklore, blues, spirituals, and folktales were not very much contemplated in the Harlem movement, which divided black culture into written culture and non-written culture. Therefore, a true nationalist black culture should focus on folklore which epitomised the memories and hopes of blacks' struggle for freedom, rather than sticking to the propaganda or political literature. The cultural phenomenon of the Harlem Renaissance namely the arrival of jazz music and its accompanying nightlife, and the black literary movement that followed was occurred in Harlem for a number of reasons. The steep size of its African American population made for an abundance of black artists and audiences, leading many to refer to Harlem as the "Negro capital of the world." Also, Harlem's location in New York City, the epicentre of most American culture enterprises, permitted close interaction between black artists, white artists, wealthy patrons and established professionals. Thirdly, due to a housing boom in the early 1900s that gave impoverished blacks access to what had been an attractive white neighbourhood, Harlem became a symbol of African American optimism. A substantial number of Renaissance artists and patrons were homosexual which further estranged them from the social mainstream and they formed a tight-knit community whose ambiance was favourable to artistic achievement and success. Before 1922, however, only a handful of African Americans published significant works of fiction or verse. Black writers attempted to define Black identity and Black humanity in the unjust society of America. Notable among such works was 'The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man' (1912) by James Weldon Johnson who later became the secretary of the NAACP. Only after the breakthrough publication of Claude McKay's book of poems 'Harlem Shadows' (1922) and Jean Toomer's novel 'Cane' (1923) did black writers begin to entice close attention from mainstream publishers. In 1925, Alain Locke an African American cultural critic and philosopher, published an anthology in his so called book "The New Negro" where he discusses about Albert Barnes essay where Barnes a white patron of the black artist discussed about the distinctiveness of black art. He wrote: "That there should have developed a distinctively Negro art in America was natural and inevitable. A primitive race, transported

into an Anglo-Saxon environment and held in subjection to that fundamentally alien influence, was bound to undergo the soul stirring experiences which always find their expression in great art.... The outstanding characteristics are his tremendous emotional endowment, his luxuriant and free imagination and a truly great power of individual expression. He has in superlative measure that fire and light which, coming from within, bathes his whole world, colors his images and impels him to expression. The Negro is a poet by birth."(Locke, 1997:19)

The artistic production of 'The New Negro' as prescribed by Locke, sought both to assert a positive racial identity and to claim a place for black artists in American culture. Steven Watson in his book *The Harlem Renaissance* quotes W. E. B. DuBois who said as follows: "The great mission of the Negro to America and the modern world is the development of Art and the appreciation of the Beautiful" (DuBois, 1995:7) Including works by writers such as Langston Hughes, McKay, Hurston, Toomer and Countee Cullen, Locke's volume came to define the purpose and character of the Harlem Renaissance up to that point and launched the careers of many black artists. In his book, 'The Addison Gayle Jr. reader' Nathaniel Norment talks about Alain Locke a proclaimed Renaissance writers as the spokesmen for the New Negro writing. Locke says, "Of all the voluminous literature on the Negro, so much is mere external view and commentary that we may warrantably say that nine-tenths of it is about the Negro rather than of him.... [We] discover in the artistic self-expression of the Negro to-day a new figure on the national canvas and a new force in the foreground of affairs. In these pages...we have nevertheless concentrated upon self-expression and the forces and motives of self-determination. So far as he is culturally articulate, we shall let the Negro speak for himself" (Norment, 1997:94) Fundamental to Locke's thesis was the distinction he made between an older generation that treated art as a form of racial self-defence and a new generation that no longer allowed such an attitude to limit its artistic expression. The black literature foundation on which to build a black racial identity became the aim set by the Harlem Renaissance. Thus, Cary D. Wintz notifies that: "By the mid-1920s the stage was set for the birth of the Harlem Renaissance. Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer had laid the literary foundations. By 1925 they had been joined by numerous aspiring young black writers who had come to Harlem looking for excitement, color, and camaraderie, and hoping for literary fame. Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Rudolph Fisher, and Zora Neale Hurston became the nucleus of a black literary bohemia that, together with other young writers such as Countee Cullen and

Jessie Fauset, would dominate black literature for a decade.”(Wintz, 1968: 80) The new era was prefigured by the release of Langston Hughes’s famous essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” in June 1926. The essay was a call to other black artists to break from the party line set by the Talented Tenth and to break the restraints put upon the artist to refrain from certain illustrations of black life was smothering and deceitful. In his manifesto ‘The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,’ Hughes wrote: “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.... If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.” (Hughes, 1971: 180-181)

The Renaissance writers of the civil rights era paved way for the black writers, including notable novelists such as James Baldwin ‘Go Tell It on the Mountain,’ Richard Wright showed Americans a Black youth raging against White oppression in ‘Native Son’ and Ralph Ellison ‘Invisible Man’ where Ellison reflects upon racial invisibility of the Blacks and playwright Lorraine Hansberry’s ‘A Raisin in the Sun.’ By the mid-1960s, however, much of the black community considered such writers highly dependent on white literary models and insufficiently militant regarding race relations. That reaction merged into the Black Arts Movement, a tight-knit artistic community closely associated with the Black Power Movement that looked inward for new, distinctly “black” self-expression devoid of white influence. The movement drew direct motivation from the late Harlem Renaissance and thus closely resonated its dominant themes and beliefs. However, the Black Arts Movement was decidedly more politically militant and racially separatist. D. Hubbard in his edited book

‘The Souls of Black Folk: One Hundred Years Later’ talks about Jean Toomer quote on the Black Arts Movement: “There, for the first time, I really saw the Negro, not as a pseudo-urbanized and vulgarized, a semi-Americanized product, but the Negro peasant, strong with the tang of fields and the soil. It was there that I first heard folk-songs rolling up the valley at twilight, heard them as spontaneous with gold, and tints of an eternal purple. Love? They gave birth to a whole new life” (Hubbard, 2003: 135) Although the Black Arts Movement was estranged from mainstream society, the movement greatly influenced the next generation of black writers. The Black Arts Movement and its predecessor, the Harlem Renaissance, occurred, then the Blacks in America felt a pride in what they were doing. They produced mostly their own literature and music, with some visual art forms reminiscent of their original culture. By the 1970s, academics had incorporated black literature as a legitimate genre and the works by black authors gradually emerged on the lists of the best-sellers. Some of the most prominent black literary figures of the last three decades have been Maya Angelou ‘I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,’ Alice Walker ‘The Color Purple,’ Alex Haley ‘Roots’ and Toni Morrison ‘Beloved.’ With the growth of the black middle class, African American writers have become less reliant on white audiences and benefactors for sustenance. The cultural forces like the “Oprah Winfrey Show” have introduced many black writers to the white mainstream.

Altogether the African American literature has evolved from the slave narratives of its early time. Racism certainly exists in a slightly diluted form in the present times also. History of African American women records the journey of their life from slavery through Reconstruction, Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights to the recent times. Black women writers have played a major role in African American literature in the United States.

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